JFK 'Plot' Figure in New Orleans: His Own Story

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By GEORGE LARDNER

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NEW ORLEANS, Feb. 23—I may have been the last person to see David W. Ferrie alive.

While I talked to Ferrie, once interrogated as the "getaway pilot" for a presidential assassin, he said:

He was convinced there was no plot to kill President Kennedy and, that Lee Harvey Oswald was a "loner."

Ferrie, one of District Attorney Jim Garrison's prime witnesses in the investigation of Kennedy's assassin, also said:

He was convinced the investigation would turn out to be a "witch hunt."

"This is not a city prone to knowing what it's doing before it arrests people," he declared.

This was the substance of a four-hour interview that I had with Ferrie, ending shortly before 4 a.m. yesterday.

At 11 a.m., just seven hours after I left Ferrie, his body was discovered with a sheet pulled up to his chest.

As if in a parting gesture, he said: "A president is no better than anyone else. If I were killed, I'd expect my death to be investigated just as thoroughly."

He then went back upstairs to his room, perhaps to prove the point.

Today New Orleans authorities are in disagreement over the cause of his death. Orleans Parish Coroner, Dr. Nicholas J. Chetta, said Ferrie died of a ruptured blood vessel at the base of the brain. Garrison called it an apparent suicide.

[Another puzzling aspect of the case developed when Chetta said Ferrie's death must have occurred sometime Tuesday night, according to United Press International.

[Garrison said the time of death estimated by the coroner and the time of the Lardner interview created a major inconsistency and was "one of the mysteries we don't understand."

[Garrison said his investigators, who had Ferrie's apartment staked out secretly "for some time," saw the lights go out at 11 p.m., an hour before the interview.

[The investigators left when they saw the lights go off.]

Garrison declared that his investigators had intended to arrest Ferrie next week in the district attorney's highly publicized investigation of the death of Kennedy. Garrison has asserted that Kennedy's death in Dallas on Nov. 22, 1963, was the product of a plot hatched in New Orleans.

Garrison hinted that Oswald was not the actual assassin of President Kennedy.

"I have no reason to believe that Lee Harvey Oswald killed anyone in Dallas," he said. "This is my personal feeling." He did not elaborate.

Coroner Chetta said an unsigned, undated note was found in the dining room of Ferrie's apartment. It said, in part:

"To leave this life is, for me, a sweet prospect, I find nothing in it that is desirable and on the other hand everything that is loathsome.

Garrison called Ferrie "one of history's most important individuals."

DELAYED ARREST

"Evidence developed by our office had long since confirmed that he was involved in events culminating in the assassination of President Kennedy," the district attorney said. He said that he decided only yesterday morning to hold off Ferrie's arrest another week.

A loner himself, Ferrie seemed in good spirits while we talked, not like a man about to kill himself.

"Kennedy is dead," he said. "Let's get on with living."

But he also described himself as moody, even, at one point as I recall it, given to manic-depressive moods.

A brown bottle of medicine, tablets apparently, was standing on the worn piano in his living room when I left. Garrison said 14 other bottles were found scattered around the house. Ferrie was reportedly suffering from emphysema.

It was Ferrie who forced Garrison to acknowledge Saturday that he was conducting a full-scale investigation of what Garrison called a conspiracy resulting in the Kennedy assassination.

Ferrie, 48, ruddy-faced, with what appeared to be a deep red wig glued on his head and apparently false eyebrows, said: "I was the first one they questioned."

He had been summoned by Garrison's men last November on broadly the same grounds for which he had been picked up within 72 hours after Kennedy's assassination.

At that time he had been arrested as a "fugitive from Texas" and questioned about

reports that he might have been in Dallas the afternoon of the assassination, waiting at Love Field with a plane to fly Oswald to safety.

Ferrie said he was sitting on a courthouse bench outside a federal district courtroom in New Orleans, "shooting the bull with a couple of federal agents," until a case he had been working on was completed at 3:20 p.m. that day.

"There wasn't even any charge against me in Texas to flee from," he said.

Ferrie said he did leave for Texas with several acquaintances after leaving the courthouse—to Galveston and Houston "hunting geese"—but that he never set foot in Dallas.

Ferrie said he never knew Oswald and had no recollection of ever having met him. Oswald was rumored to have served in Ferrie's Civil Air Patrol unit in New Orleans, but Ferrie said they were in different units.

Ferrie also was rumored to have flown Oswald to Cuba around 1959. He scoffed at the report.

"I've never even been to Cuba," he said. "At the time I was supposed to be flying Oswald to Cuba, I understand he was in the Marine Corps."

Ferrie said he considered "this pre-occupation" with the Kennedy assassination "ghoulish." But his rooms showed that it occupied him day and night.

Copies of magazine articles on the President's death, books attacking the Warren Commission, even his own mathematical calculations of the path of the assassin's bullet, cluttered the floor.

On Tuesday, he said, he had been at the public library reading the Warren Report.

He also had been conducting his own investigation to counter Garrison's.

TALKS TO EXILE

On Monday, he turned up at a restaurant near Canal Street to talk to Carlos Bringuier, a Cuban exile who had scuffled with Oswald three years ago on a New Orleans street corner over Oswald's distribution of leaflets of the Fair Play for Cuba Committee.

Bringuier, who insists that the assassination was a pro-Castro conspiracy, recalled Ferrie's visit with distaste.

"He asked me if I could help him," Bringuier said. "He told me that anyone who thinks there could be a Communist plot behind the Kennedy assassination should go to a psychiatrist. That's the first time anybody ever sent me to a psychiatrist."

Pulling out a paper napkin as he was sitting in his restaurant, the Casa Cuba, Bringuier read off the questions Ferrie had asked of him:

1. Are any Americans or any Cubans that Oswald had any association with in New Orleans.

"2. If there is a conspiracy, when it started, the dates."

SHRUGS IT OFF

Bringuier, who went on the speaking circuit after the assassination with the Right-wing organization Christian Crusade, shrugged.

"There was a plot," he insisted, adding that he disagreed with Garrison's declaration earlier in the week that a foreign power was not involved.

In his apartment shortly before he died, Ferrie explained his own investigation by saying, "I'm just curious." He said he did not trust the courts or Garrison's investigation.

He said he was sure that the FBI had investigated Oswald's activities in New Orleans thoroughly and was now waiting for Garrison to fall on his face. The District Attorney said earlier in the week that "arrests will be made, convictions . . . obtained."

Ferrie's body was found by a man police refused to identify. Garrison said the individual had to break into the house to make the discovery.

INVESTIGATION GOES ON

The district attorney also vowed full speed ahead with his investigation of the Kennedy assassination. He said he had no intention of calling in the FBI.

Ferrie, who had in the past been arrested on morals charges involving young boys, said he did have until recently his own doubts that Oswald was the only assassin. He referred to the "myriad of paperbacks" that came out last fall, around the time that Garrison began his investigation.

Ferrie said he was especially disturbed by the controversy over the autopsy report, suggesting that there must have been more than one rifle aimed at Kennedy on the parade route.

He said he resolved the problem in his own mind only last Sunday when he realized that the position of bullets indicated in Kennedy's clothing and in his body on a morgue slab distorted their true points of entry and exit, since he was sitting in an upright position in a limousine.

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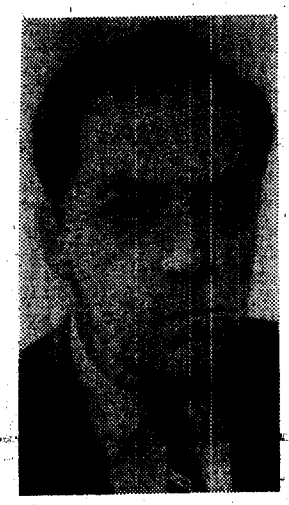
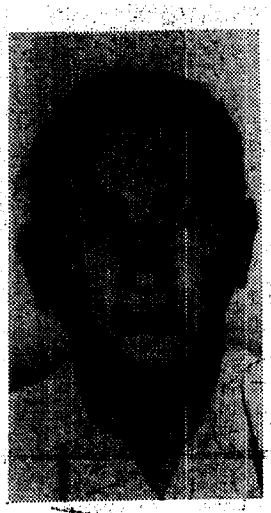


JIM GARRISON



DAVID FERRIE

Private Eye Back, Absolves Ex-Pilot

NEW ORLEANS, Feb. 23 (UPI)—A former investigator who claimed to know four conspirators in a 1963 plot to assassinate President Kennedy dropped out of sight early today, but later showed up at District Ottorney Jim Garrison's office.

David Lewis, 26, met newsmen briefly, to say David W. Ferrie, 49, an eerie looking former Eastern Airlines pilot found dead in his apartment Wednesday, was not one of the "possible members of the plot."

Lewis said previously he had given Garrison four or five names of persons involved in the conspiracy, and as a result feared for his life.

He dropped out of sight with his wife and four children last night, but reappeared at the district attorney's office late this morning.

He refused to say anything other than that Ferrie was not one of the group he knew.